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ABSTRACT

A previously published discussion of the ACER "Australian Studies in School Performance" suggests that the performance of students constitutes a concern; however, it is possible to be encouraged by evidence from the study that 97% of 10 year olds and 99% of 14 year olds have mastered the abilities to understand simple written sentences. The assertion that comprehension of longer pieces of writing is much poorer deserves attention. Analysis of the newspaper comprehension test, for instance, indicates that it may be less a test of reading comprehension than a test of experience in reading newspapers, including deciphering the peculiarly elliptical language of headlines and knowing how to locate information in newspapers. An examination of results of the paragraph-reading portion of the test indicates that perhaps what appears to be a failure to understand may be instead a failure to carry out a number of mental operations over and above making some sort of sense of a passage. Analysis of the ACER survey indicates little evidence that there is a need to change the approach to and the emphasis on the teaching of the skills of literacy, although the survey does provide some interesting questions and data that lead to valuable insights about how children handle specific reading tasks. (TJ)

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LITERACY AND ALL THAT

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Language and Learning Unit

Literacy and All That

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Schools Discussion Paper No 1, "Literacy and Numeracy" (March 1978) concludes its discussion of the ACER "Australian Studies in School Performance" with the suggestion that, "there are some respects in which the performance of students in our schools constitutes a concern". I'd like to consider the aspects of students' literacy which the paper implies we should be worried about and explore the implications for teaching.

CAUSE FOR SATISFACTION

Before looking for things that should concern us we might take heart from the ACER study's evidence that almost all ten year olds and fourteen year olds have mastered the complex abilities that contribute to the understanding of simple written sentences. 97% of ten year olds and 99% of fourteen year olds achieved "mastery" in reading the following sentences and relating each of them to an appropriate picture (Reading Simple Sentences Subtest).

THE BOY SAW A FISH IN THE FISH BOWL.
HE IS TALLER THAN HIS SISTER.
HE CHOSE THE BIGGEST AEROPLANE.
THE THREE BLOCKS ARE STANDING ONE ON TOP OF THE OTHER.
THE WOMAN WAS SURPRISED TO SEE THE HORSE INSIDE.

The fact that so many children are able to read such sentences with understanding suggests that the cause for concern lies beyond this, "basic" ability. It makes one question the value of talk about "getting back to basics" and clearly puts a lie to the notion that a substantial proportion of children in normal classrooms suffer from specific reading disabilities (special class children were excluded from the ACER survey).

BEYOND SIMPLE SENTENCES

The results from the three ACER subtests concerned with comprehension of longer pieces of writing appear to be less encouraging. The percentage of students achieving mastery in the three subtests are:

SUB-TEST	10 year olds	14 year olds
Paragraph Reading	66	75
Newspaper Information	45	70
Newspaper Comprehension	32	67

What are we to make of such figures?

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"NEWSPAPER COMPREHENSION"

It is encouraging to think that the ACER survey included attention to 'real world" reading tasks, but it is a little strange when we realize that the survey was intended to focus on "basic skills of literacy ... necessary to further learning". While comprehending newspaper items obviously depends on a variety of basic skills, it also depends on a complexity of skills that can only be acquired through reading newspapers, probably over a number of years. I wonder how much experience fourteen year olds have had with reading newspapers. I suspect that most ten year olds do little more than glance at pictures, headlines, comic strips and sports scores. It is unlikely that they have learned to handle the peculiarly elliptical language of headlines or the unusual repetition of the one sentence paragraphs that follow. (See item 23 below). Nor do they have the knowledge of places, events etc., which newspaper writers assume that their adult readers have. So it would seem that evidence gathered about childrens' newspaper comprehension cannot tell us much about "basic skills of literacy necessary to further learning". It may simply reveal how much experience children have had with newspapers. Therefore the finding that one third of 14 year olds and two thirds of 10 year olds did not achieve mastery in "newspaper comprehension" is not, for me, particularly alarming. If I were to take the results at face value, I'd probably consider making more time in the curriculum for newspaper reading and for the kind of discussion and writing that would lead children to understand the peculiar, and sometimes difficult, forms and conventions of newspaper language.

But I, for one, don't take the results at face value. I think we need to question how well the subtest on "newspaper comprehension" samples and represents students' abilities in understanding newspapers. Is what they have to do to answer the test items, what they do when they make sense of a newspaper article?

THE "CONSTRUCT VALIDITY" OF THE NEWSPAPER COMPREHENSION TEST

To work out whether tests measure what they say they do (i.e. their construct validity) it's a good idea to look at the range of items to see whether they correspond with what we would see as the key aspects of understanding newspaper articles.

Of the ten items used to measure students' abilities to comprehend newspapers:

2 items require the interpretation of cartoons (items 29, 30).

1 requires interpreting road signs (item 31).

2 depend on the ability to make sense of the headline "PAY GRAB SPARKS OFF SECURITY CLAMP".

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1 depends on knowing what "DRAGNET" means.

2 require reading an article to find specific (but not quite literal) information.

2 require careful reading of an article to determine exactly what it is about (e.g., item 23 below).

The four items mentioned in the last two categories are, to my mind, excellent questions which test students' ability to make sense of interesting, well written articles. But these items constitute only 40% of the subtest and it worries me to think that each of these items is given no more weight than the knowledge of one, not particularly frequent word, "dragnet" and that the two questions which require reading for specific information, together receive no more weight than the understanding of "PAY GRAB SPARKS OFF SECURITY CLAMP". The questions on the cartoons and the road signs are ingenious but one wonders what they have to do with "basic skills of literacy ... necessary to further learning". I'd argue that the subtest is lopsided. It doesn't tell us what we need to know about basic skills and the claim that a particular percentage of students has acquired mastery in "newspaper comprehension" appears not very useful when we realize what was used to assess newspaper comprehension.

My interpretation of the usefulness of these items is, of course, worth no more than the next person's. Some of the items are included, therefore, to give you the opportunity of making your own judgements.

29. Read the Smiffy cartoon and answer this question. 'I think I should set my sights on new horizons' means

——— I should look behind me.

——— I need to change my seat.

——— I need some changes in my life.

——— I should look up at the sky.

.../4

30. Look at the cartoon on page 3 where a man says 'We'd like a pleasure cruise - book us on different ships'.

He really means that

——— he is keen to go on a holiday with his wife.

——— he wants to get his tickets the cheapest way.

——— he wants to see the world by boat.

——— he does not enjoy holidays with his wife.

"We'd like a pleasure cruise— book us on different ships."

31.

Which of these road signs tells the driver to stay in line behind the cars in front of him?

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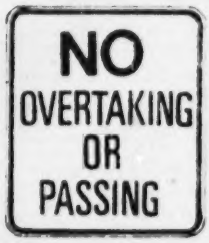

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23. The article about the tiger tells of a man who

——— was killed by a tiger.

——— shot a tiger.

——— was rescued from a tiger.

——— tamed a tiger.

PUSSYCATS TO TIGERS

A YOUNG MAN mauled by a tiger at Bacchus Marsh lion park "has liked pussycats and all animals since he was a boy," his father said last night.

The man, Bela Franko, 22, was released from Bacchus Marsh hospital yesterday after being mauled on Sunday.

His father, Bela senior, said: "He likes animals better than people almost.

"Whenever he sees a cat or dog he goes and says hello to it."

The manager of the lion park, Mr Brian Beaverstock, said yesterday Franko "just walked straight up to the tiger and trapped it against a fence."

Simba, a Sumatran tiger, leaped at Franko, knocking him to the ground, Mr Beaverstock said.

As the 145-kg (320-lb) tiger pinned Franko to the ground a young lion rushed in and grabbed his shirt.

"They were having a tug of war with him," Mr Beaverstock said.

A park warden picked up a gun and locked the gate of the compound while another warden rammed Simba with a Land Rover.

The tiger and the lion, both 2½-year-old males, retreated.

Mr Beaverstock said: "The tiger had to attack—it's just mechanical for them when a human walks into short space [illegible] and passes the point of no return.

"Had it not been for the quick action of the wardens Franko would have been done for.

"He had deep wounds in the arm and marks on his back, and was bleeding profusely.

"One puncture mark was close to his [illegible] vein."

Mr Beaverstock said there were 22 [illegible] in the park, warning people to stay in their cars.

NEWSPAPER I[illegible]ORMATION

The subtest dealing with newspaper information consists of only four items all of which test the ability to locate specific bits of information in a newspaper.

20. Look at the front page. At the bottom left hand corner find the index of news in other pages. You have not been given all of the pages. If you had, on which page would you find some recipes to help Mother bake cakes?

—— 18
—— 20
—— 22
—— 25

21. If someone else had tried to put an advertisement for a RED SETTER in the PETS column, it would have been placed

—— just before IRISH SETTER.
—— just before SAMOYED.
—— just before QUEENSLAND HEELER.
—— just before RHODESIAN RIDGE BACK.

32. The 9RV TOP 25 ALBUM SURVEY shows an album by Olivia Newton-John in 12th position. Its name is

—— Best of My Love.
—— First Impressions.
—— Have You Never Been Mellow.
—— There's One in Every Crowd.

33. What telephone number would a person have to ring to find out about the SCHNAUZER pups, advertised in the PETS column?

—— 282347.
—— 233 4565.
—— (059) 67 4248.
—— 478 2469.

The questions seem basic enough and the results (45% mastery for ten year olds and 70% for fourteen year olds) seem to suggest that sizeable groups of students may have difficulty in locating information in newspapers. Perhaps their inexperience with newspapers is the cause, but I should not want to rule out the possibility that students in these age groups lack general information location skills that would be useful in school project work. Teachers may feel that more attention could be given to helping children to efficiently locate information relevant to their purposes.

PARAGRAPH READING

The claim that 75% of 14 year olds achieved mastery in "paragraph reading" is based on answers to six questions asked about one passage of three paragraphs.

Paracutin was born in Mexico in February, 1943. At the end of one week, Paracutin was 500 feet high and it is now over 9000 feet high. Today Paracutin is asleep.

What is Paracutin? It is the only volcano in the world which has been seen from its birth right up to the present day. On February 20, 1943, a peasant and his wife set out to work in their maize fields from the Mexican Village of Paracutin. They were surprised to find the earth warm under their feet. Suddenly they heard noises deep in the earth and a small hollow appeared in their field. In the afternoon there was a sudden loud noise and stones were flung high in the air. The peasants ran from the field and turned to watch. They saw the birth of a volcano.

There were great bursts of stone and lava and a little hill began to form. By evening this hill was 100 feet high and hot ashes were falling on the village. At night the glare of the hot lava lit up the countryside. The trees near the village were killed and the villagers had to leave their houses. When the village was abandoned, its name was given to the volcano. The news quickly spread to Mexico City, far to the east. Many sightseers and scientists flocked to the scene. The volcano grew and grew for ten years and hundreds of square miles of forest was destroyed. Then Paracutin went to sleep. In spite of all the explosions, not one person was killed.

The Paracutin passage would seem a good one for a test of reading comprehension. It is similar to the material children encounter in reading laboratories - short, self-contained and comparatively culture free, in the sense that most children could be expected to know a little, though not much, about Mexico or volcanoes. The passage has a nice balance of narration and description. It has cohesion. It has interesting information presented in a manner that encourages visualization. The sentence structure is simple and almost all words would be within the listening vocabulary of fourteen year olds. One would expect young adolescents to be able to make sense of such a passage. Yet apparently 25% of them can't. But what does this figure mean?

PROBLEMS WITH COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

It is immensely difficult to measure peoples' understanding of a passage without, at the same time, measuring a whole complex of test-taking skills. The danger is that what appears to be a failure to understand may, in fact, be a failure to carry out a number of mental operations over and above making some sort of sense of the passage.

When we come to look at the questions asked about the Paracutin passage, it might be valuable to ask ourselves what we need to do to answer the questions. Let us assume that when a substantial number of students (e.g., more than ten)

.../8

choose a particular 'wrong' answer, they are probably making sense of the passage but arriving at conclusions or meanings which differ from what we expect. The question we should then ask is what is it in the passage or the question choices that has led so many students to such meanings. In doing this, we may not only come to question the validity of the test questions but also to understand some of the complex processes that go to make up understanding written language.

In the following questions, the numbers represent the percent of students who chose that answer. The figures were kindly supplied by Sid Bourke, Project Director for the Australian Studies in School Performance.

14. Paracutin was once the name of

__2__ a peasant.
__70__ a village.
__23__ an old mountain.
__3__ a Mexican.

15. What was destroyed in the eruption?

__7__ only a village.
__2__ the villagers living close by.
__90__ the forests and fields around Paracutin.
__1__ two peasants.

16. When the writer says that Paracutin 'went to sleep', he means that it

__2__ flattened out.
__84__ stopped sending out ashes and lava.
__12__ will never be a volcano again.
__1__ got covered with grass and trees.

17. Paracutin is now

__2__ erupting.
__53__ temporarily inactive.
__42__ permanently dead.
__2__ flattened.

18. From the story, where does it appear that Paracutin is located?

__30__ in eastern Mexico.
__60__ in western Mexico.
__5__ in northern Mexico.
__3__ in southern Mexico.

.../9

19. What can we learn about volcanoes from this passage?

81	New volcanoes may appear in unexpected places.
5	There have always been volcanoes on the earth.
11	Volcanoes are active from time to time.
1	Volcanoes are active for only a few months.

We might well ask why 23% of students chose "an old mountain" in item 14, why 12% chose "will never be a volcano again" in item 16, why 42% chose "permanently dead" in item 17, why 30% chose "in eastern Mexico" in item 18 and why 11% chose "volcanoes are active from time to time" in item 19.

For example, in item 14, one can see that almost all students understood that Paracutin was a mountain but many did not appreciate the significance of the word "old" or the force of "once". It seems that what is being tested is the ability to pick tricky questions. As my 12 year old son observed about item 32 (Newspaper Information), "Why do they try to trick you like that?"

What worries me more is item 27 which can only be answered by deciding whether "Paracutin is now asleep" means "is temporarily inactive" or "is now permanently dead". The rest of the passage has nothing to say about the issue and the item hardly seems a question of "paragraph reading".

Item 18 beautifully reveals what many children do in relation to test questions. 30% of students seemed to have re-read the passage cursorily, located the phrase "far to the east", and decided the most appropriate choice was "in eastern Mexico". Kids quite rightly don't expect to be tricked, and I'm not sure what we prove when we try to trick them.

So we could go on. The same kinds of issues can be seen in other items and in those prepared for ten year olds. How anyone can lump together results from such diverse and unusual questions and make generalizations about "paragraph reading" is beyond my understanding. That anyone can make claims about a particular percentage of children achieving "mastery" in "paragraph reading" is most surprising when it is apparent that there is no such single thing as paragraph reading skill. Yet Schools Discussion Paper No 1., claims (p.6):

> NEVERTHELESS, "PARAGRAPH READING" IS A DESIRABLE SKILL NOT MASTERED BY A QUARTER OF FOURTEEN YEAR OLDS. IT IS CLEAR THAT EFFORTS TO IMPROVE READING SHOULD NOT BE RESTRICTED TO THE PRIMARY SCHOOL.

While every parent and teacher in the state would endorse the claim of the

.../10

second sentence, it seems to me that the first sentence is quite meaningless. All that can be said is that a quarter of the fourteen year olds tested failed to get what a group of researchers considered to be a satisfactory number of answers to a set of questions devised by the Reading Project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. That these questions test much more than (and often much less than) the ability to understand passages should make us wary of any generalizations made about answers to them.

My conclusion is that the ACER survey has little of value to say about standards of literacy and no clear evidence that there is "a need to change the approach to and the emphasis on the teaching of the skills of literacy" or at least the approach to and emphasis on teaching reading, for space does not permit a discussion of the survey's findings about writing and spelling. The survey is valuable in that it provides some interesting questions, and data that lead to valuable insights about how children handle specific reading tasks.

Perhaps we should ignore the results, administer the tests to our students and then discuss with them the reasons for their choices. In this way we may learn something valuable about what they do, given these specific reading tasks and perhaps we can then look for ways of monitoring what they do when they read books and other 'real world' material, for information and pleasure.

L. & L.U. A286/Apr.'78.